

The Vermont Early Education Initiative 2005-06 Year End Report

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The Vermont Early Education Initiative

2005-06 Year End Report

Background

The Early Education Initiative Grant Program was established by the Vermont Legislature in 1987 to fund collaborative, community-based early childhood education services to three- and four-year-old children at risk of school failure. Although some services existed at that time in Vermont (i.e. Head Start, Early Childhood Special Education), many children were still “falling between the cracks” and starting school without the early developmental supports which foster school and life success.

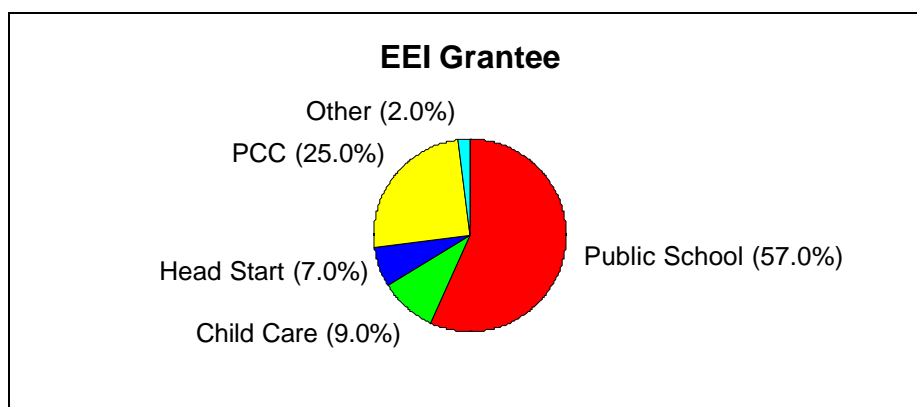
A report conducted by the Carnegie Foundation in 1991 found that 28 percent of Vermont children were not prepared when they entered kindergarten, a figure substantiated by follow-up surveys of Vermont kindergarten teachers conducted by the Agency of Human Services and Department of Education. Subsequent surveys have revealed that the number of children unprepared for kindergarten was steadily reduced to 20 percent in 1994 and continues to hover in the 25 to 30 percent range.

The Early Education Initiative Program (EEI) exists to reduce the percentage of children unprepared for kindergarten by identifying those children early and, when current services are unavailable or insufficient, providing necessary early childhood education and developmental intervention. Working with other community-based early childhood programs and families, the EEI program is designed to avoid duplication of services in those communities where adequate services currently exist.

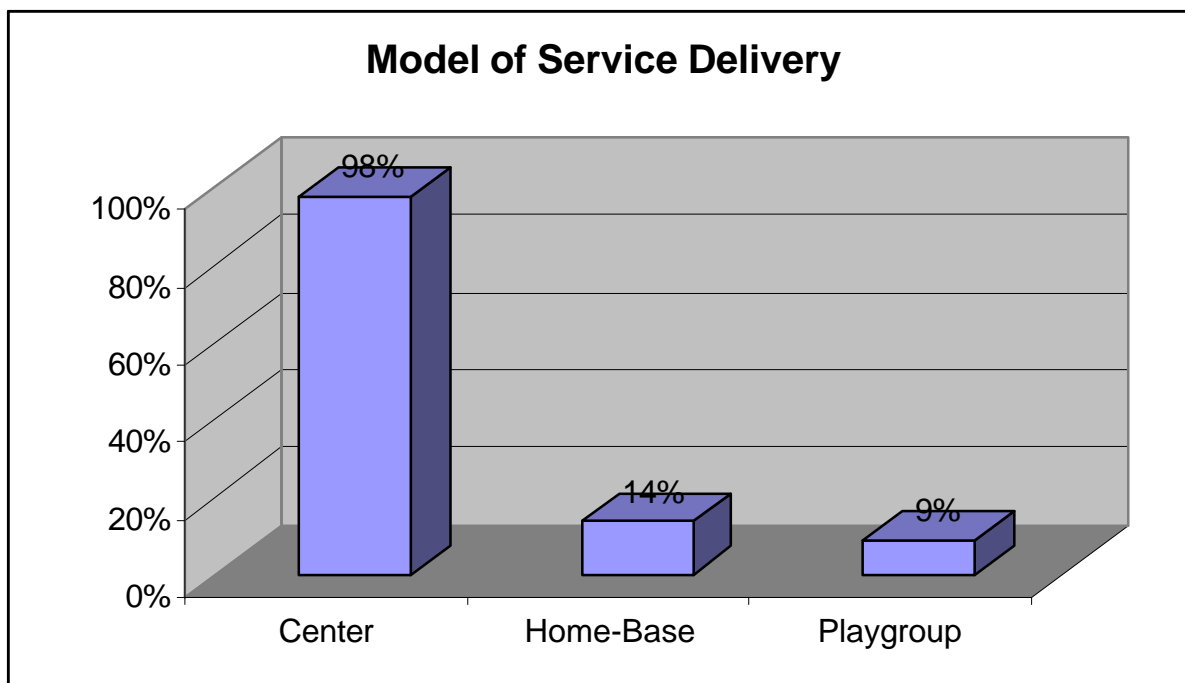
Program Services and Availability

During the 2005-06 year, there were a total of 44 EEI programs operating throughout various regions in the state. These programs served 1,104 children in 135 towns, representing 54 percent of all Vermont towns. The number of children and communities served has fluctuated over past years, up from 1,089 children in 2004-05 but down from a high of 1,207 children in 1992-93 (reduction in numbers parallels decreased funding levels or rising costs). Of the 135 participating towns, many provided services to one or two children rather than fully meeting the needs of all eligible children in those communities. It is misleading to assume that all eligible children in the 135 towns were served, as significant waiting lists were maintained.

Of the 44 EEI programs, 25 (57 percent) were administered by school districts and supervisory unions. A number of these school-sponsored EEI programs were done in collaboration with community-based child care programs. Eleven parent-child centers provided EEI services in seven regions throughout the state (25 percent) and Head Start served additional children through EEI funding in three programs (7 percent). The remaining grantees were four early childhood programs/child care centers (9 percent) and one community resource and referral agency (2 percent). All 44 programs coordinated services closely with regional Early Childhood Councils to supplement services, fill gaps, and avoid duplication.



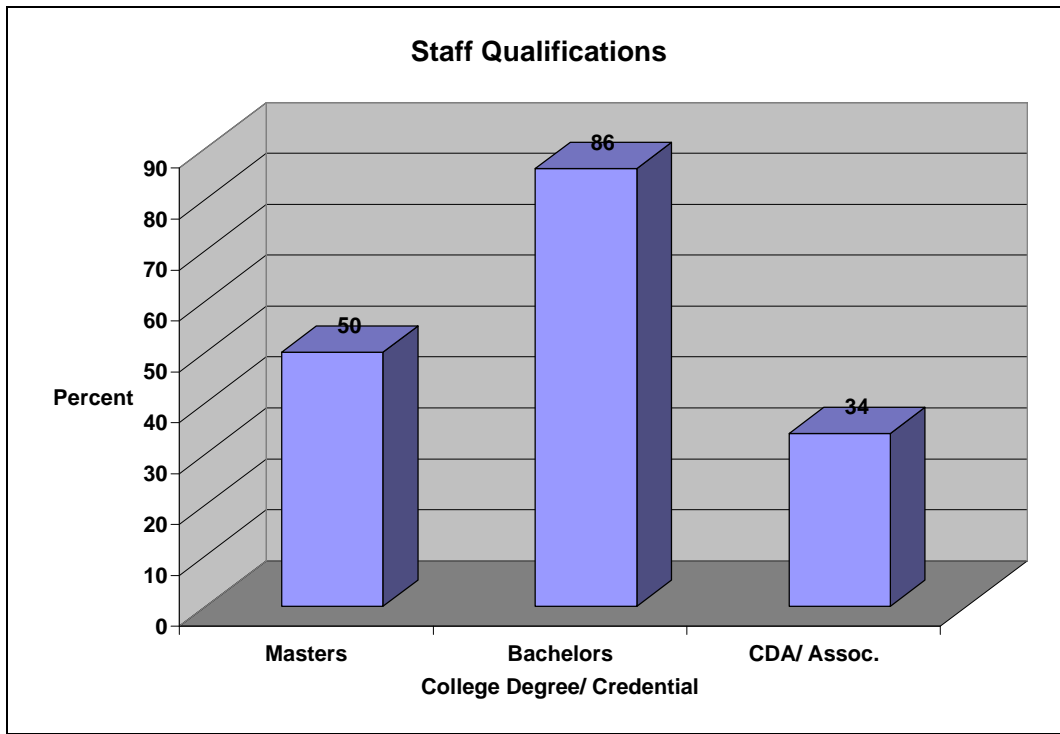
Services were delivered to children through various models. Center-based programs were the most common method (98 percent). However, home visiting programs (14 percent) and community playgroups (9 percent), in which parents accompany their children, were also used. Many EEl programs offered combinations of these models in an effort to meet the needs of children and the diversity of parents' schedules, particularly as welfare reform efforts have been instituted. Children received early education services for an average of 38 weeks. The average weekly educational program consisted of 12.25 hours of early education services over three and one-half days.



Program Quality

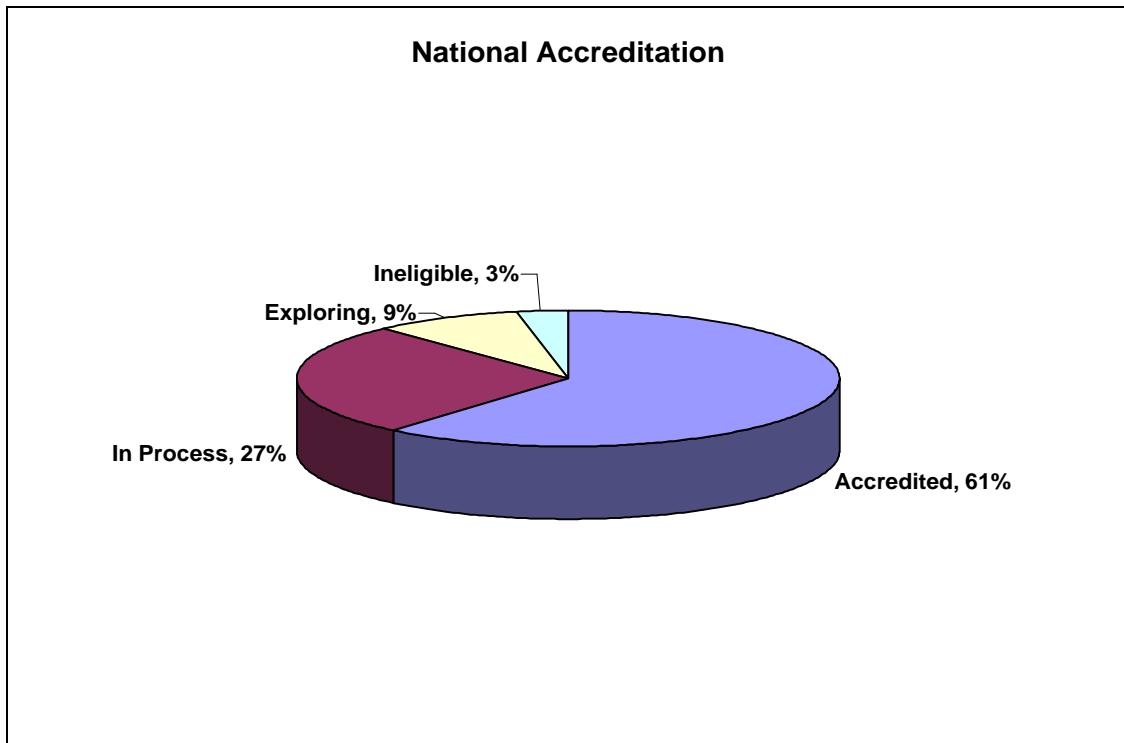
Staff Qualifications

Recognizing that there is a correlation between the quality of staff and program effectiveness, EEI programs are committed to employing highly qualified professionals and continuing professional development. Forty-three programs (98 percent) employed at least one person with a bachelor's degree or higher in early childhood education, early childhood special education, or a closely related field. Among those programs, 22 (50 percent) employed early educators with a Master's degree, 36 (86 percent) with a Bachelor's degree, and 15 (34 percent) with an Associate's degree or Child Development Associate (CDA) credential.



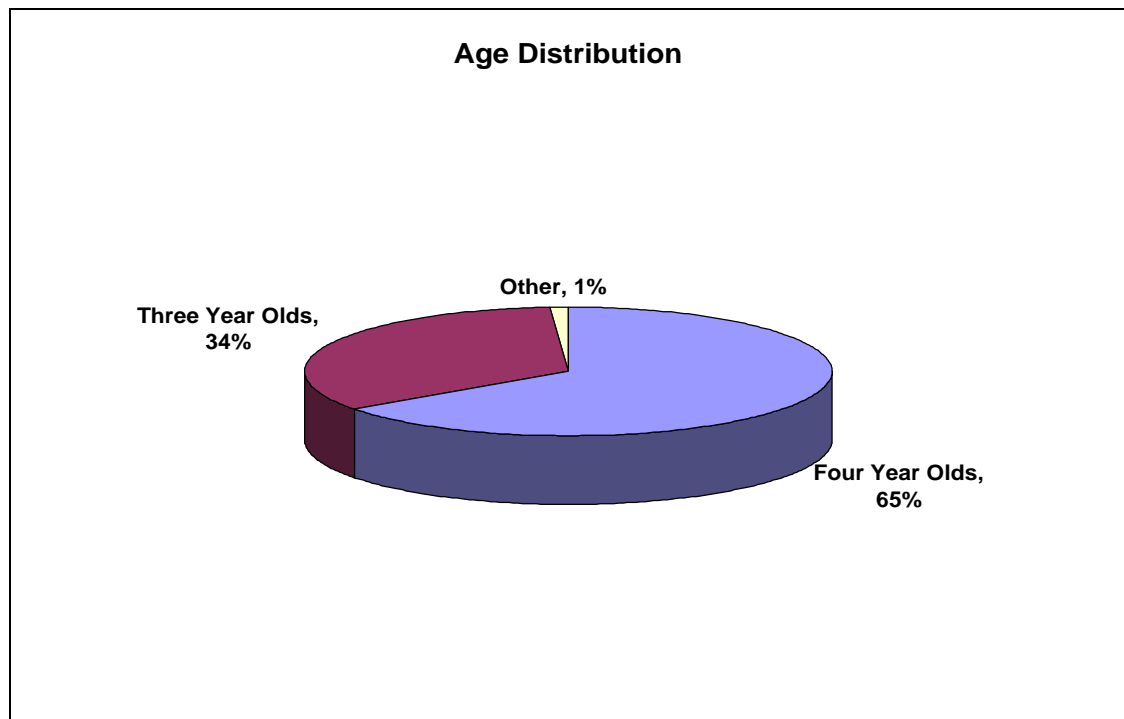
Program Quality

EEI grants are awarded to programs that have been recognized as having quality either by national recognition or community reputation. Programs providing center-based services have been increasingly encouraged to obtain national accreditation as a measure of their quality. Of the 43 programs that provide center-based services, 27 (61 percent) have obtained national accreditation with an additional 12 (27 percent) programs currently in process and awaiting notification. This represents an increase from the previous year when 17 programs had obtained national accreditation. Fourteen programs (32 percent) are pursuing the newly developed Vermont approval system called STARS. Three programs are exploring national accreditation and the remaining program model does not make it eligible for accreditation.



Age Distribution

Recognizing the effectiveness of early intervention, attempts were made to identify preschool children at the earliest point that a potential or probable problem was present. Of the 1,104 children served last year, there were 716 four year olds (65 percent), 371 three year olds (34 percent), four children under three years of age (<1 percent) and 13 five year olds (1 percent) who missed the kindergarten entrance date.

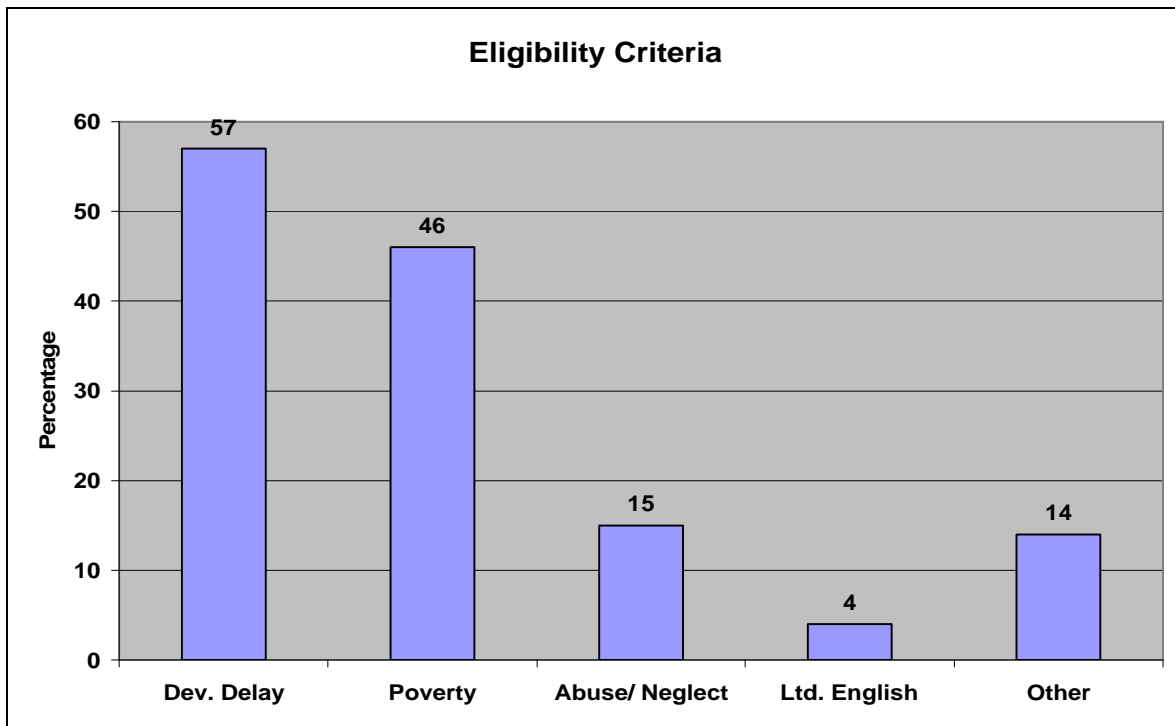


Eligibility Criteria

Based on the legislation, EEI services are designed to serve preschool children who are at risk of school failure due to several factors: significant developmental delay, living in poverty, at risk of abuse or neglect, limited English proficiency or other identified concerns.

Of the 1,104 preschool children served between 2005-06, 634 (57 percent) exhibited developmental delays of at least six months when they entered the program, an increase of nine percent from the preceding year. Of these children, 147 (23 percent) had delays of greater than 18 months and were later found eligible for and referred to Essential Early Education (EEE). Approximately half (46 percent) of all children receiving EEI services were economically disadvantaged, with 511 children qualifying according to this criteria. This represents an increase of 10 percent since 2003-04. There were 170 children who were at risk of being abused or neglected, accounting for 15 percent of the EEI population. This represents a continued decrease from 2001-02 when 24 percent of the children met this criterion. Forty children (4 percent) exhibited limited English proficiency, primarily due to languages other than English being spoken in the home, with the highest concentration in Chittenden County. There were 150 children (14 percent) who exhibited other concerns deemed to put the child at risk including exposure to violence or drug abuse, social isolation/social incompetence, young parent age and history of education drop-out, incarcerated parents, significant behavioral problems or medical conditions.

It should be noted that these figures represent a duplicated count, due to many children simultaneously meeting two or more criteria. Research confirms that the co-occurrence of two or more risk factors places a child at significantly higher risk for sustained problems.



Lack of Previous Services

EEI is intended to make certain that fewer children “fall between the cracks” and reduce the percentage of children not prepared for kindergarten. Upon enrollment, 845 children (78 percent) had not received any previous early childhood education services and would likely have entered kindergarten without any previous experience.

For children receiving previous early intervention or education services prior to EEI enrollment, a significant percentage (23 percent) were participating in programs deemed insufficient or inappropriate to meet the educational needs. As children were identified as having multiple and more challenging needs, programs collaborated to deliver intensive intervention services. Parents identified and selected EEI services to serve as an appropriate supplement to their child’s educational program. Some children had participated in programs that discontinued services.

During their participation in the EEI program, 147 children (13 percent) participated in supplemental early childhood services in order to address child and family needs. The most common forms of supplemental services were child care and early childhood special education (Essential Early Education).

Unmet Need For Services

Although many EEI programs do not maintain formal waiting lists due to their continually full enrollment status and limited administrative capabilities, 23 programs reported an inability to meet the enrollment needs of all interested or eligible children. There were 297 children placed on waiting lists for these programs, a 20 percent increase from 2003-04. Waiting lists ranged from one child in three locations to 49 children in Milton. It should also be remembered that EEI programs only reach 54 percent of Vermont communities, leading one to conclude that there are significantly more eligible age children across the state who are not served.

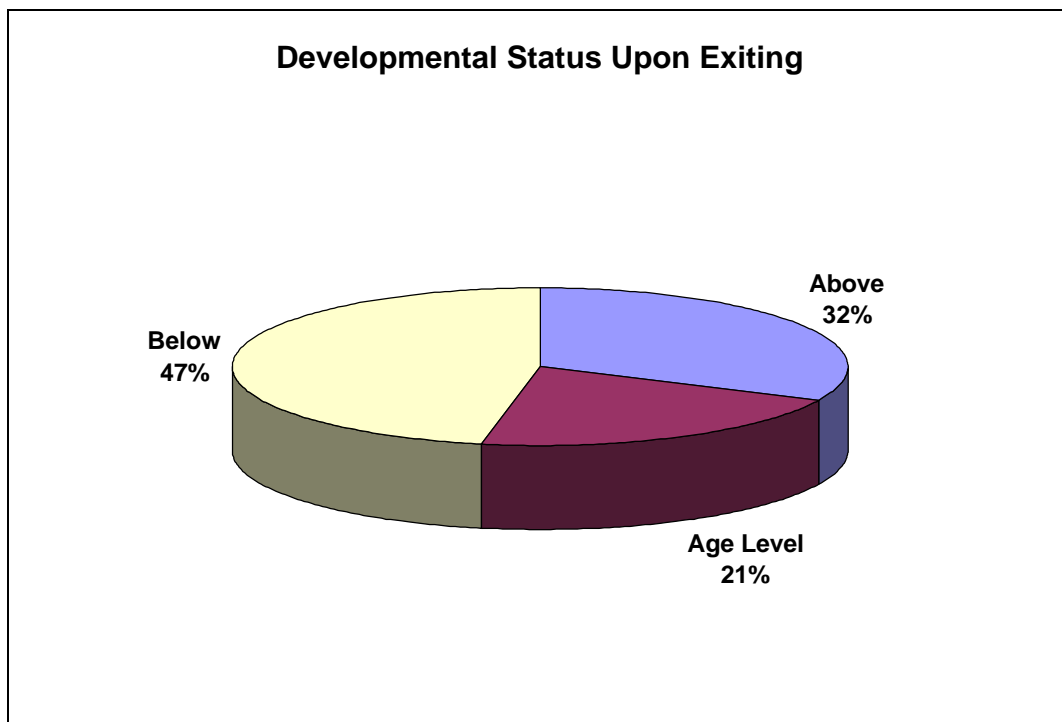
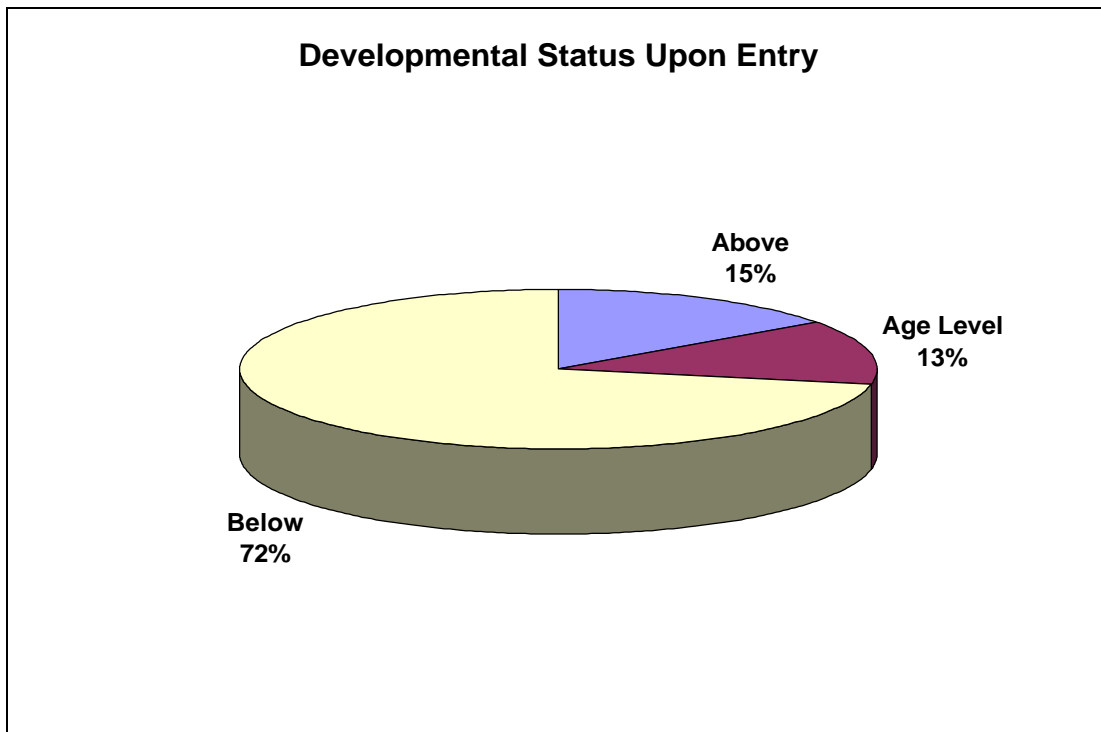
Developmental Assessment Results

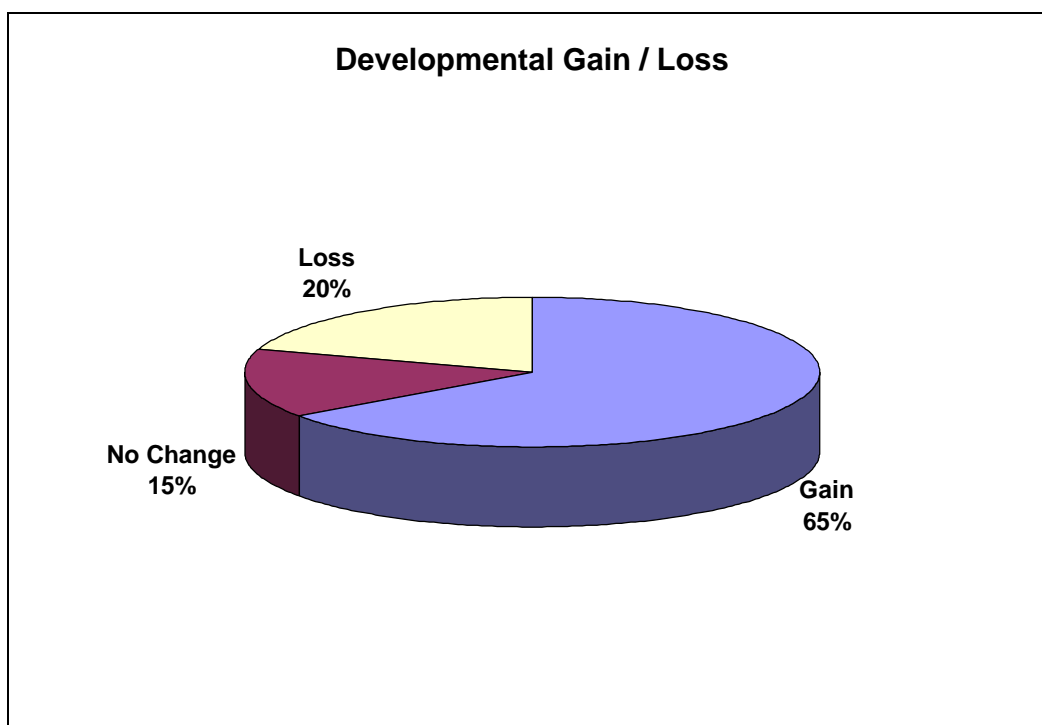
Over the past several years, EEI programs have conducted standardized and performance-based developmental assessments of all children upon their enrollment and exit to kindergarten. During 2005-06, pre- and post-test results were available for approximately 800 children, providing a representative sample of EEI children’s developmental progress. Some children participated in EEI programs for one or two years before leaving the program. Since programs are permitted to use one of six approved instruments, this report will describe the developmental progress by grouping the instruments as either norm-referenced (standardized) or criterion-referenced (performance-based) assessment measures.

Norm-referenced Assessment Results

There were 113 children for whom pre- and post-test scores were reported based upon norm-referenced assessments. Initially, 80 children (71 percent) showed significant developmental delay when entering the program. Post-test results indicated that 53 children (47 percent) still exhibited some developmental delays. When the magnitude of the developmental progress for these children was examined, however, it was found that 65 percent of the children exhibited accelerated gains where developmental gains exceeded expectations compared to chronological gains. In other words, if a child was in the program for 12 months and posted developmental

gains of 16 months, the child would be considered as showing positive gain. Post-test results indicated little or no developmental change for 15 percent of the children (most tested at- or above-age level when beginning the program) while 22 percent showed some loss in developmental progress. The vast majority of the children (approximately 90 percent) showing developmental loss were identified as being in need of Early Childhood Special Education and appropriately referred to EEE for services

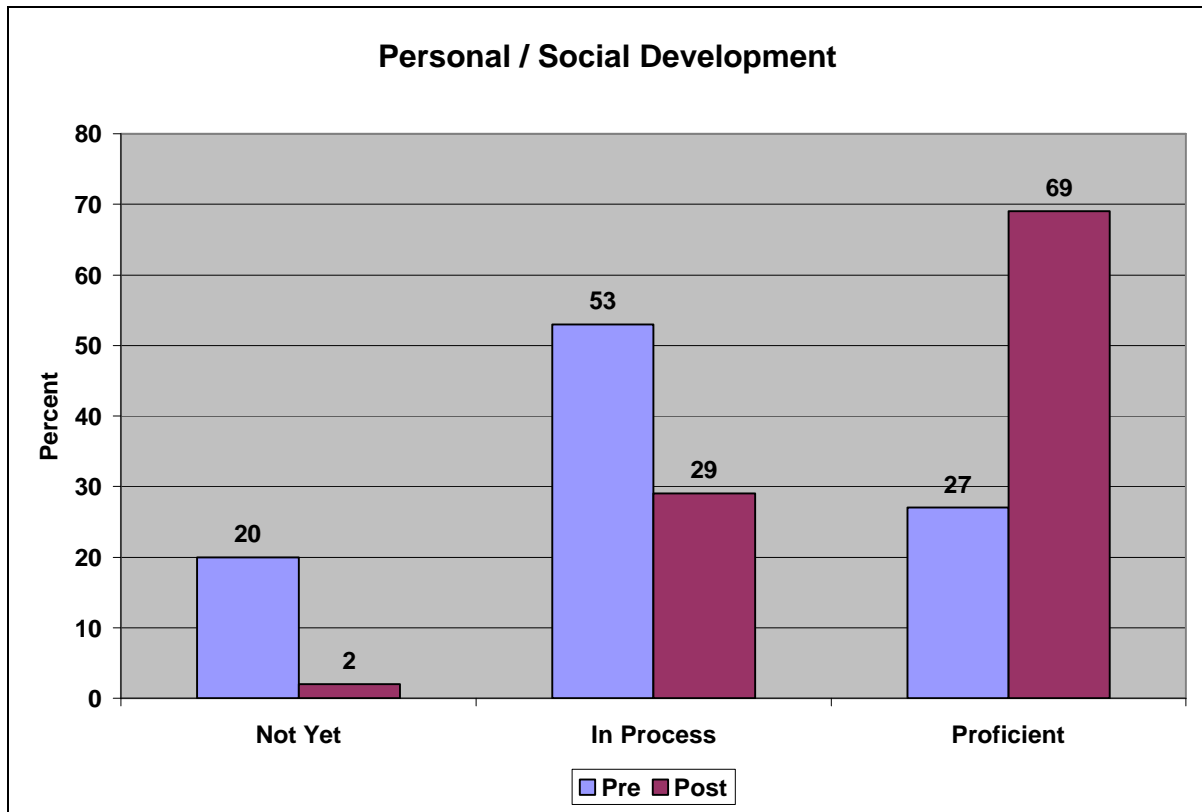
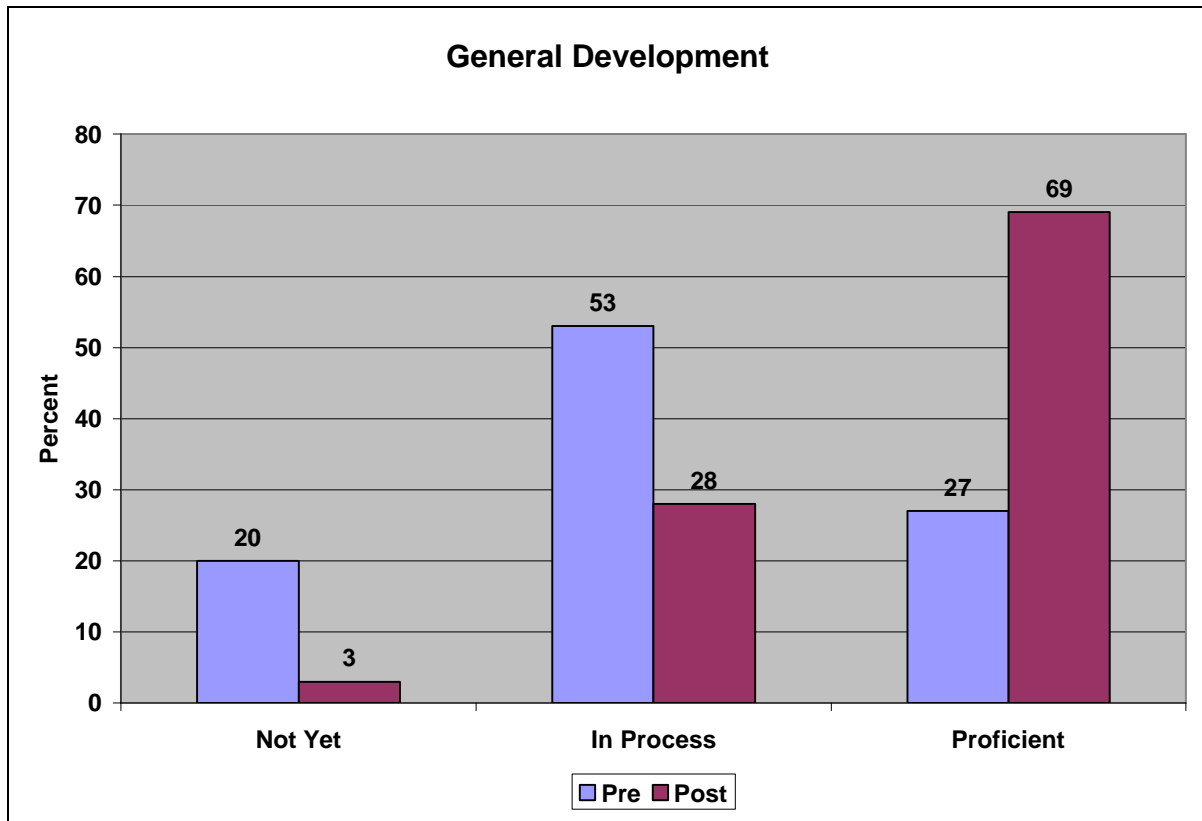


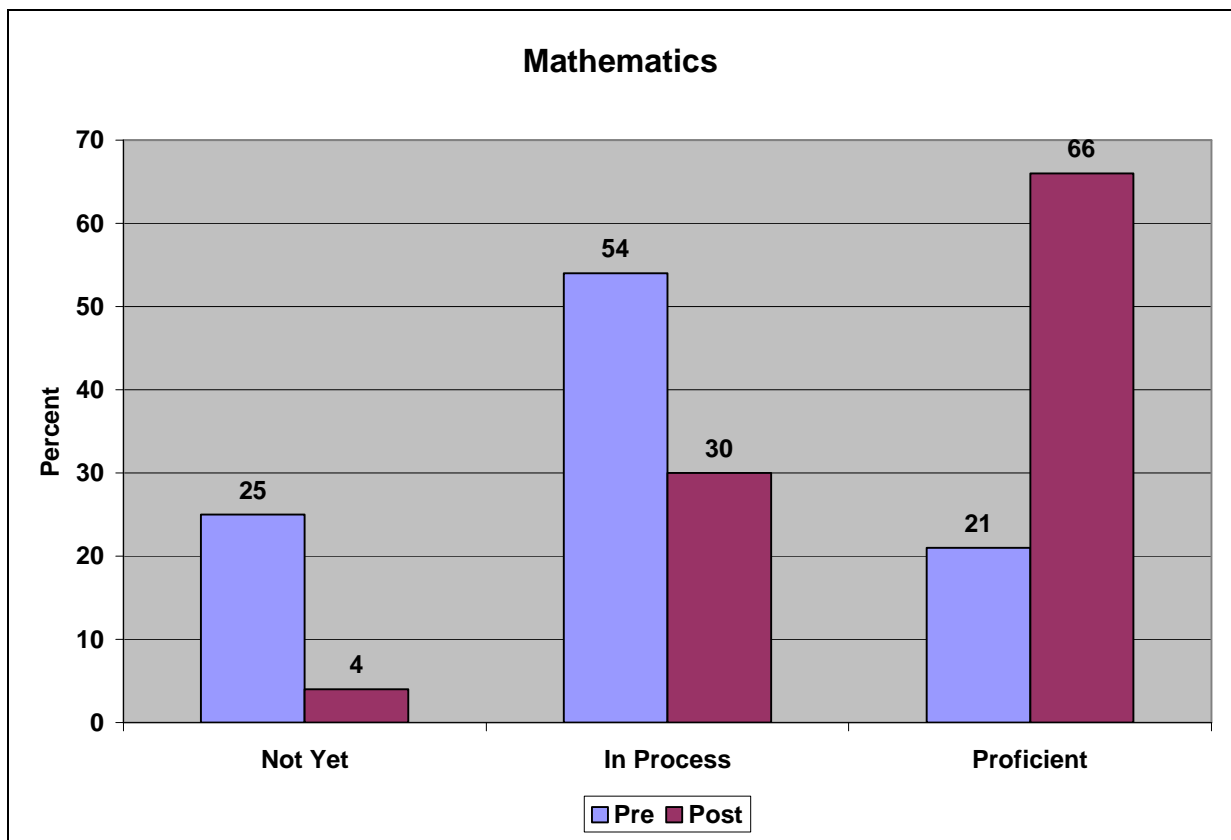
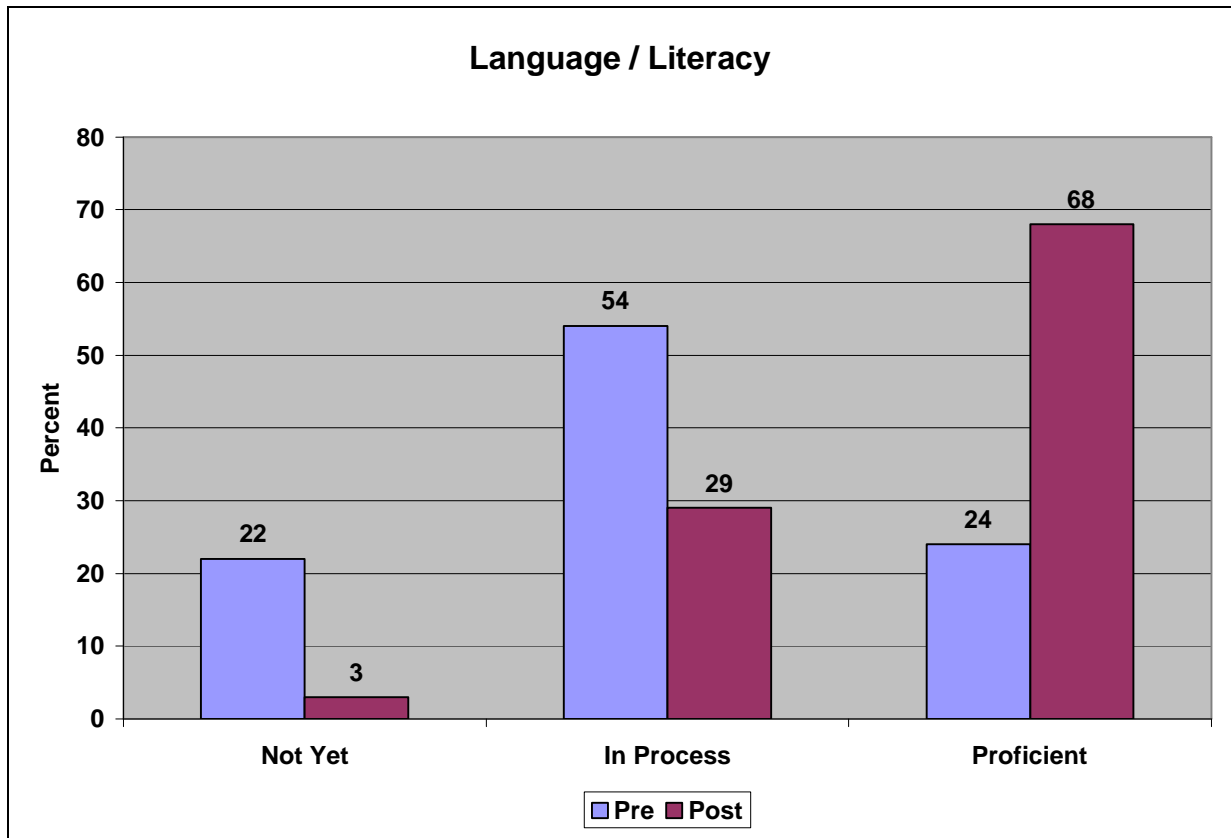


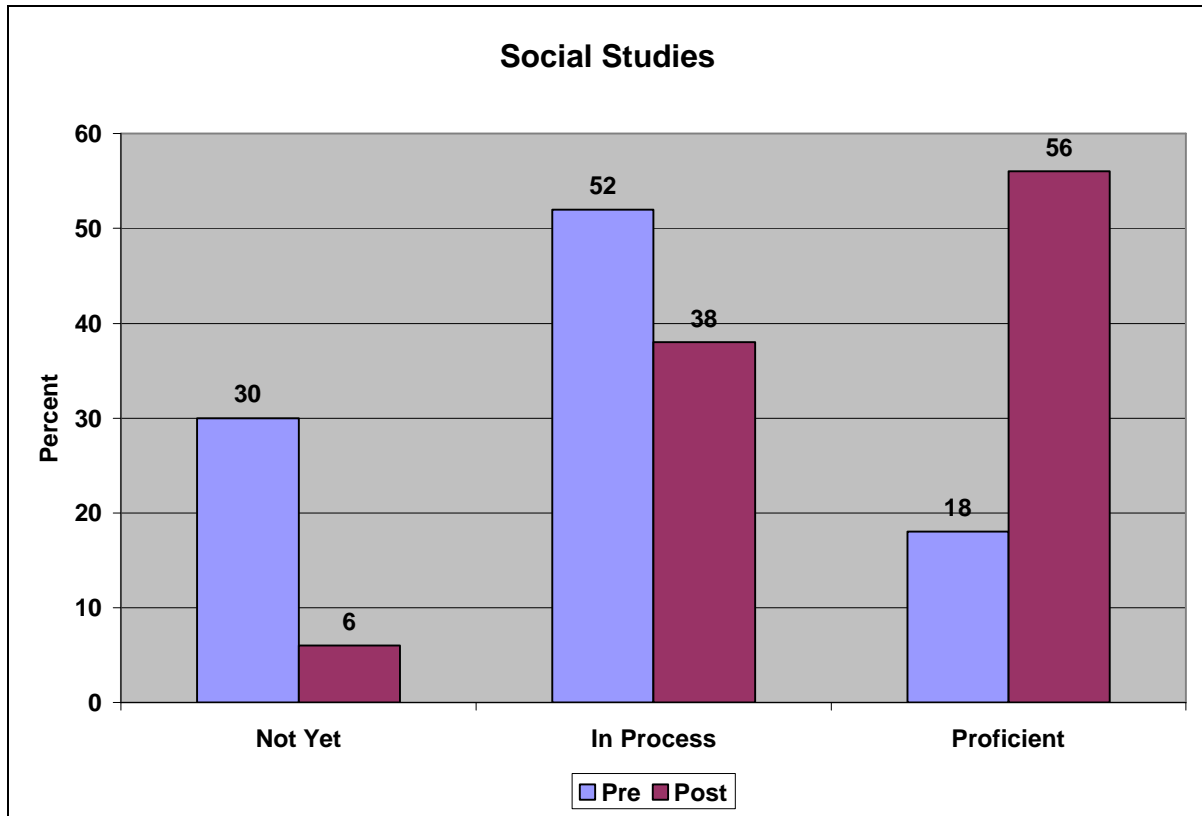
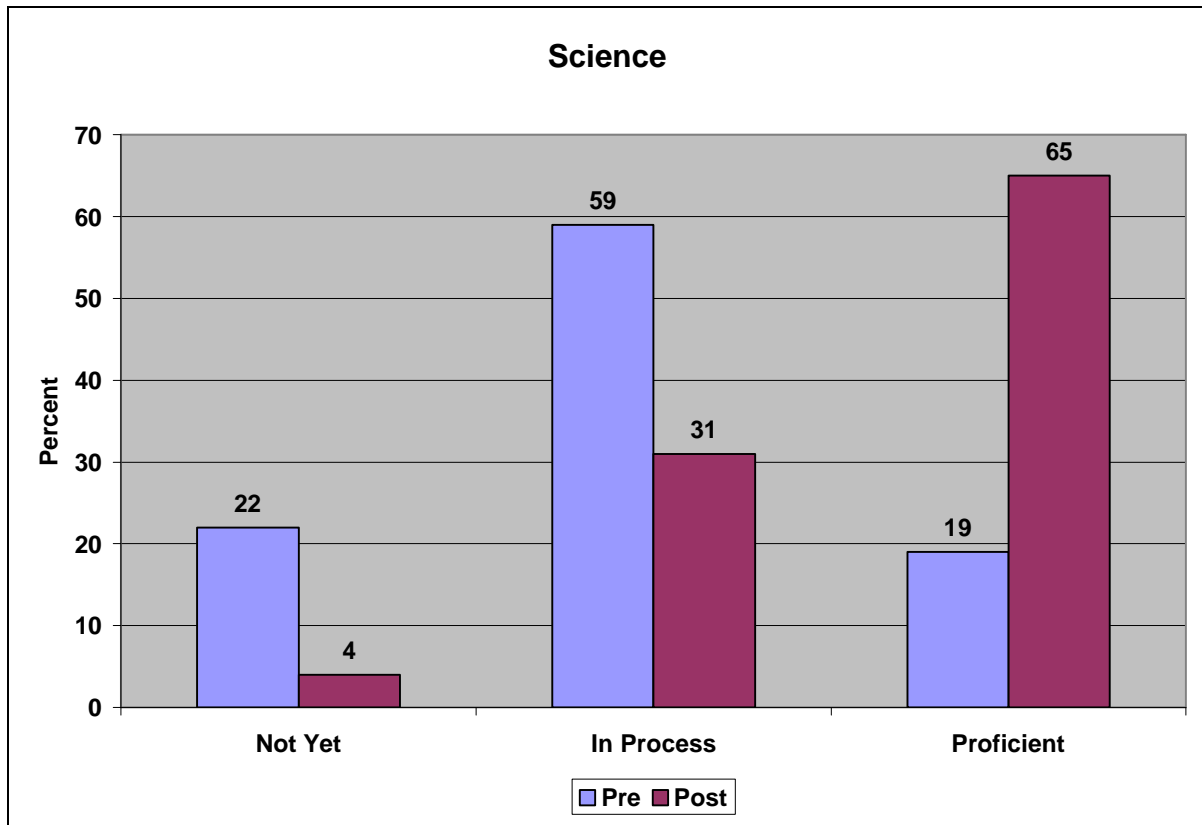
Criterion-referenced Assessment

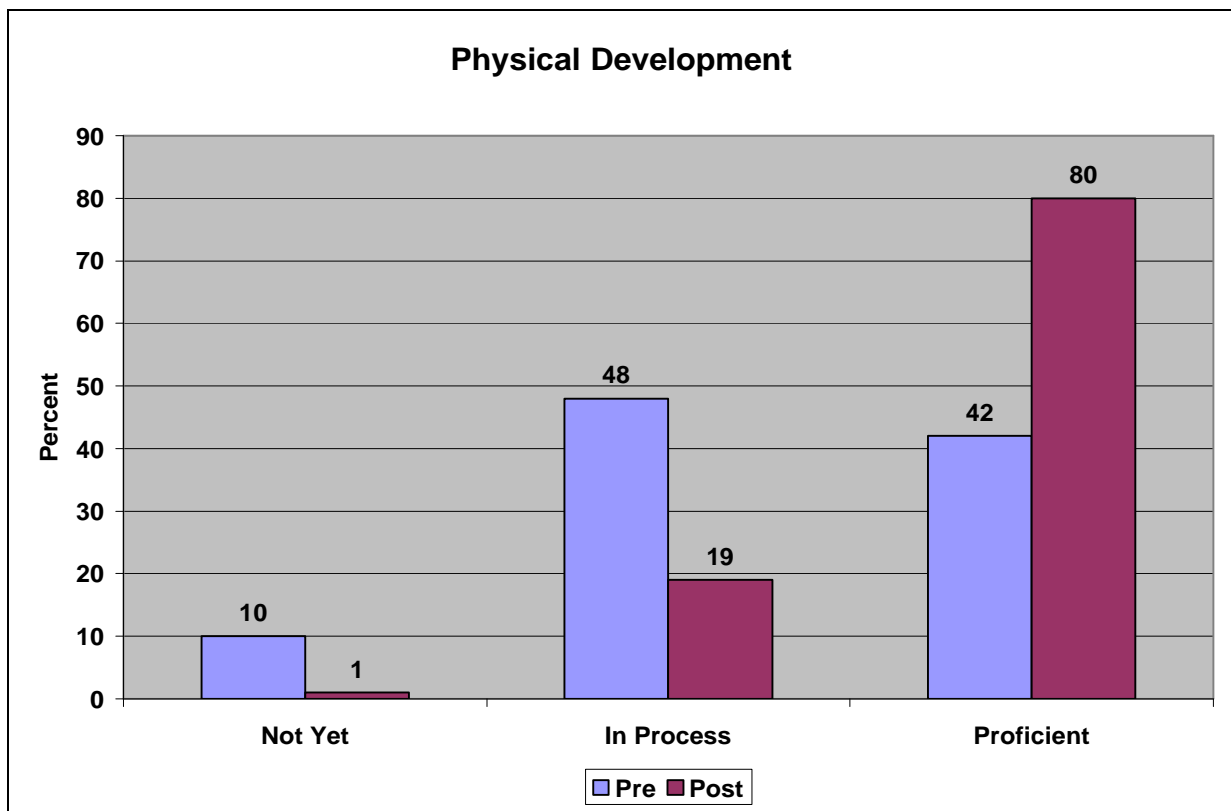
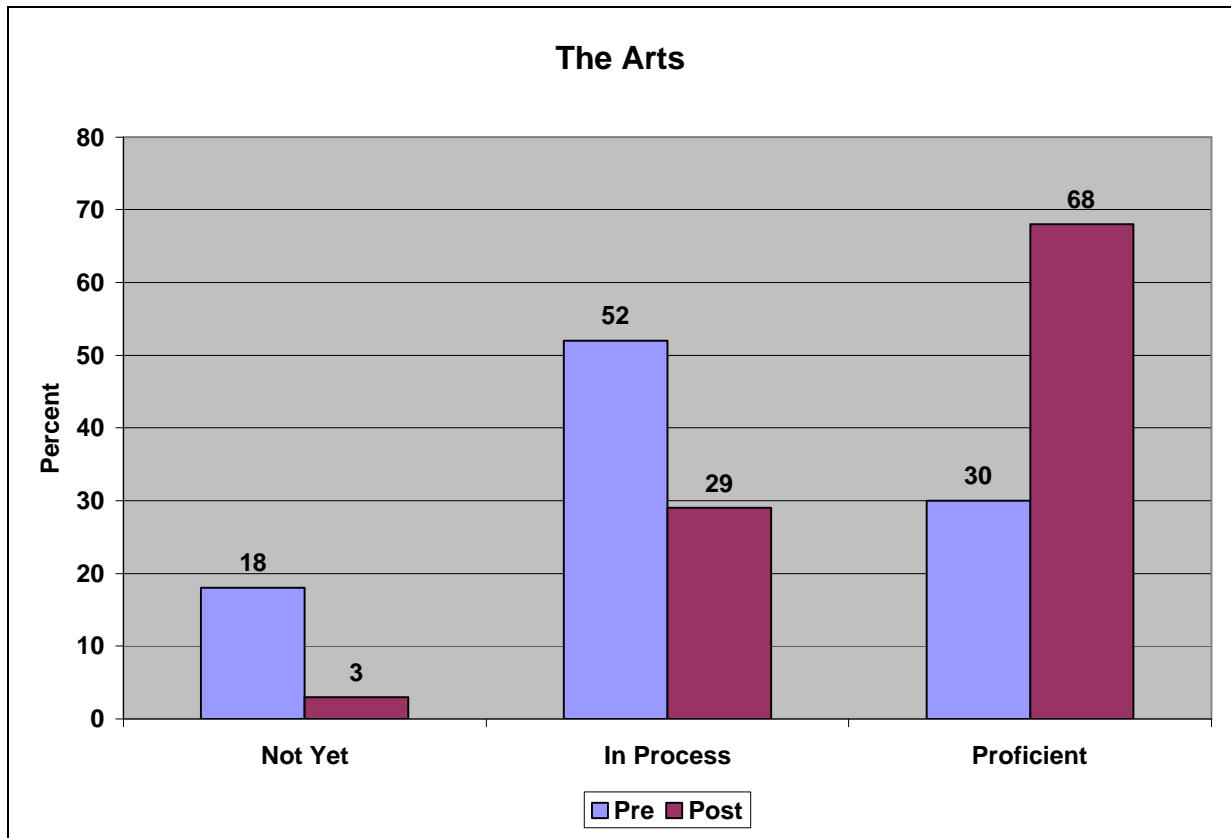
As educational research has demonstrated, the results of standardized testing of preschool children may be suspect due to their low levels of reliability and validity. Current best practice for ongoing assessment in the field is to utilize criterion-referenced (performance-based) instruments for children in this age range, relying upon multiple sources of information concerning a child's development taken at different points in time, as compared to the single testing situation required by standardized testing. This would lead one to consider the above assessment results as a single piece of isolated information that has the potential for inaccurately portraying the impact of EEI services on developmental progress. One limitation of performance-based assessment is that the results do not permit percentile comparisons similar to norm-referenced tests commonly used in upper grades. At present, 31 (70 percent) EEI programs are implementing performance-based assessment with high staff and parent satisfaction.

The Work Sampling System was the instrument most commonly used (87 percent of programs). Work Sampling System examines the progress of children across seven developmental domains: Personal/Social, Language/Literacy, Math, Science, Social Studies, the Arts, and Physical Development. Using teacher observation and portfolio assessment, children's development is categorized as Proficient, Emerging (In Process) or Not Evident. As seen in the figures below, the developmental progress made by children was dramatic.



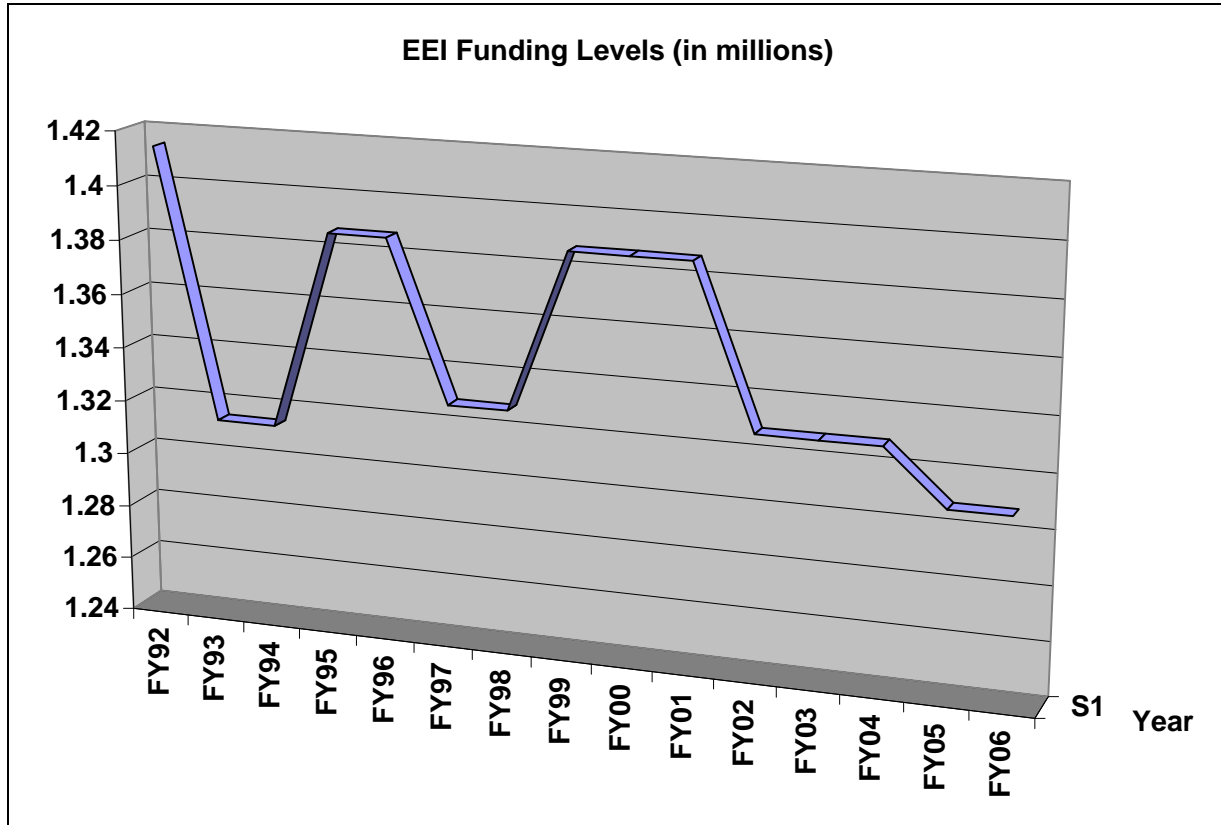






Funding of EEI Programs

When the Vermont Legislature established EEI funding in 1987, it established a base-level grant award of \$30,000 per program. Vermont has experienced both economic growth and decline since EEI's inception, and there has been an impact on the funding levels for programs. Due to statutory constraints, EEI has never been adjusted on an annual basis to accommodate the increased cost of living or expenses for conducting business. Presently, grants are issued at 1987 levels of \$30,000 per grantee.



Although funds provided to grantees to operate EEI programs have remained steady since 2002 at \$30,000 each, the actual costs necessary to operate the program have increased steadily in reaction to inflationary pressures. It is estimated that the actual cost of providing services to children has increased by 51 percent since 1987 whereas, when adjusted to inflation, funding for EEI programs has declined by 34 percent (NASA Gross Domestic Product Inflator/ Deflator Calculator). In other words, a program costing \$30,000 to operate in 1987 would cost \$45,300 in 2006. Conversely, a \$30,000 grant in 1987 dollars would have purchased \$19,900 worth of services and goods in 2006. Failure to adjust for inflation risks further erosion in the quality of services (intensity and frequency of program) provided or number of communities served.

Conclusion

The Early Education Initiative program continues to provide high quality early education services to at-risk preschool children who might otherwise be without any early childhood education experience prior to arriving at kindergarten or are receiving education services at an “untherapeutic dosage” level. The children served through EEI represent a portion of Vermont's preschool population which, at this early point in their lives, is most at risk of school failure and its costly long-term consequences. Academic and social gains demonstrated by participants of this high-risk group have contributed to the significant reduction of children who enter kindergarten not ready to succeed.

The Early Education Initiative exists as one important patch in the quilt of a coherent, comprehensive system of early childhood services which strives for effectiveness and efficiency. Focusing on elements related to school readiness and success, EEI complements other programs that may primarily address health, child care and parent education. As Vermont moves toward its goal that ensures every child will start school ready to succeed, EEI remains a proven, essential, non-duplicative program serving those young children who might otherwise “fall between the cracks.”